

USAID and Elections Support: A Synthesis of Case Study Experiences

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The U.S. Agency for International Development
and Elections Support:
A Synthesis of Case Study Experiences

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

As the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) and other donors have become increasingly active in supporting

elections in developing countries, their experiences have stimulated debate and raised important questions about the impact of international support for elections. Development practitioners and policymakers now are asking under what circumstances should we be involved and how can we best support elections?

This brief review begins to answer these questions by filling the gap in comparative analysis. U.S. support for elections in 15 case study countries was examined systematically to discern overarching trends and common lessons learned. U.S. support for elections has included some combination of the following types of assistance: elections monitoring, commodities assistance, pre- and post-elections support, civic education, political party training, other types of technical assistance, and diplomatic pressure for reform.

This paper concludes that USAID and other donors have a sound understanding of how to use assistance effectively to support democratic elections; however, the long-term impact of this assistance on democracy and sustainable development is not well understood. This conclusion is derived from answering three strategic questions. The questions and the main points of the analysis are summarized briefly below.

Why has USAID supported elections?

In elections support, there are commonly three levels of results that USAID has aimed to achieve:

- o First, a free and fair election is the standard anticipated outcome when providing assistance. In over half of the case studies considered, observers assessed the election as successful.
- o Second, beyond the event, support for elections is expected to accomplish a second objective -- strengthening democracy and governance. In eight of the case studies, improvements in levels of democracy and governance were noted by analysts in the time period following the election.
- o Third, a more ambitious objective for assistance argues theoretically that democracy and governance programs serve interim goals, and are the means to reach sustainable development objectives. However, in none of the observed countries was this relationship explicitly examined in project documentation and political analysis.

What conditions and factors have had a significant impact on the success of donor support for elections?

Analysis showed an apparent relationship between five conditions and the outcome of elections across the 15 case studies. The following five conditions most frequently influence the election outcome, and are important to consider when deciding whether elections support is likely to be successful:

- o Political parties must be committed to the democratic process,

regardless of the election outcome. If political parties or other political actors fail to abide by election results, then elections cannot lead to democracy.

- o Where present, democratic histories and traditions in a society will positively influence the election, and where absent will exert a negative force.
- o The existence of a strong civil society increases the likelihood that elections will succeed. Voluntary organizations and non-governmental groups constitute civil society and serve to link the individual and the state. During elections these groups can play an important role in monitoring, engaging in formal and non-formal civic education, holding elected officials and parties accountable, and in cases of fraud, by protesting election results.
- o Two other determinants of elections success -- the linkage between state and party, and the electoral system -- in three of 15 case studies were altered through donor negotiations. When considering whether to provide elections support, donors must assess the likelihood that they can level the playing field, if necessary, through negotiation.

How can USAID best support the electoral process?

Based on past experience, several tactics and tools have proved particularly effective in supporting democratic elections:

- o The timing of U.S. Government involvement is significant; where possible, involvement at least three months prior to an election is advised.
- o U.S. collaboration with other donors can prevent wasteful duplication of efforts and lessen suspicions on the part of host governments.
- o A well-briefed international observer delegation can serve to reassure voters, deter certain types of fraud, and report on the fairness of the electoral process, whether or not the observed election is deemed successful or unsuccessful.
- o Pre-electoral missions have been successful in encouraging electoral reforms, particularly those headed by delegates of prominent diplomatic stature, such as a former head of state.
- o Parallel vote tabulations (PVTs) have been highly successful in verifying election results and forestalling violence in cases where official results are slow to be announced.
- o Assistance for non-partisan domestic observers serves as a long-term investment in democratic institution-building, particularly in countries without high levels of ethnic divisiveness.

Finally, from the analysis of these questions, several overarching lessons emerged and merit brief mention:

- o Even if the election process is anticipated to be flawed,

donors may be able to play a positive role by supporting the election. For example, the election event can offer the opportunity for citizens to register discontent with ruling governments and for international monitors to report fraud to the international community.

- o If international intervention is required to guarantee security during elections, the prospects for maintaining post-election security are grim.
- o Support for the effort of regional institutions can have wide-reaching benefits, such as improved information sharing, and heightened pressure on incumbent governments to promote free and fair elections. The Center for Electoral Promotion and Assistance (CAPEL) in Latin America is one example.
- o A sensible distance between the U.S. Government and certain electoral support activities, particularly observer missions, can prove beneficial for guarding the independence of activities, as well as enabling U.S. embassies to retain leeway for negotiation during the post-election period.

Each of these points is elaborated in greater detail in the main text of the paper.

INTRODUCTION

The U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) and the international donor community increasingly have become involved in supporting elections in developing countries over the last several years. Elections have been viewed as an important requirement of democracy, and support for elections considered a foundation for democratic development and improved governance.

However, recent experiences have stimulated debate and raised important questions about the impact of international donor support for elections. Development practitioners and policymakers are now asking under what circumstances should we be involved and how can we best support elections?

To date, no systematic review of elections support exists that might shed light on the controversial experiences of Kenya, Angola and Ethiopia. Although literature on case study experience abounds, information rarely has been analyzed beyond the regional level. Moreover, lessons learned from individual case studies frequently conflict when compared at a regional or global level.

This brief review begins to fill the gap in comparative analysis of donor support to elections. By drawing on case study materials and regional analysis, U.S. support for elections in 15 countries is examined systematically to discern over-arching trends and common lessons learned. U.S. support for elections in four geographic regions was examined:

- o five examples were selected from Latin America -- Chile in 1988, Guyana in 1991, Haiti in 1990, Nicaragua in 1990, and Panama in 1989;
- o five examples from Africa -- Angola in 1992, Ethiopia in 1992,

Kenya in 1992, Senegal in 1993, and Zambia in 1991;

- o three from Asia -- Bangladesh in 1991, Pakistan in 1990, and the Philippines in 1986; and
- o two from Eastern Europe -- Bulgaria in 1990, and Romania in 1990.

Principal sources consulted include documents generated as a result of USAID-sponsored activities, the reports of elections observation teams, articles by country experts on the elections, local and international press coverage, academic commentaries on elections, and whenever possible, discussions with USAID officials responsible for administering assistance. The principal findings of the research are presented below in three sections.

Section One examines USAID's three major goals in supporting elections: promoting free and fair elections; strengthening democracy and governance; and, supporting long-term, sustainable development. Section Two explores the combinations of factors and conditions -- largely outside the control of donors -- that have contributed significantly to the success or failure of elections support. Finally, Section Three identifies the types of assistance that have been used successfully to support the elections process.

I. WHY HAS USAID SUPPORTED ELECTIONS?

In elections support, there are generally three levels of results that USAID has aimed to achieve. First, a free and fair election is a standard anticipated outcome. Yet rarely is the election alone the desired end-result of elections support. Typically, elections support intends to attain a higher level of impact where elections will serve to accomplish a second objective -- strengthening democracy and good governance. Finally, a third, more ambitious objective for assistance argues theoretically that democracy and governance are interim goals -- the means to reach long-term, sustainable development objectives. USAID experience in achieving these goals in the 15 case studies selected is described below.

Free and Fair Elections

Though accepted in past years, the term free and fair currently is losing popularity among electoral practitioners and international observers charged with assessing the electoral process. Some election observers find the term problematic because its definition is both subjective and variable. For example, given the general lack of agreement over what constitutes a free and fair election, it follows that two independent observer groups with conflicting standards may make contradictory pronouncements following the same election (Zak 1987: 175).

However, though election experts may view free and fair as a complex term with varying shades of meaning, the international community, press, and policymakers generally seek black-and-white judgments rather than elaborate analyses of each component of an electoral process with no definitive conclusion. Inconclusive

assessments are convenient neither from a journalistic nor a policymaking standpoint. Thus election observers find themselves pressured to apply free and fair assessments to highly complex electoral processes, knowing that these assessments may not be read beyond their summaries.

This problem gains an added dimension in countries such as Kenya, where incumbent heads of state seek international legitimacy by intentionally carrying out procedurally-correct elections, implementing just enough reforms to satisfy the demands of Western donor nations, but without a genuine commitment to the electoral process. The trend toward "D+" elections in sub-Saharan Africa has raised new questions about the use of the term free and fair to assess electoral outcomes.

Other terms, such as meaningful and transparent and representative have been raised as possible substitutes, but no consensus has been reached within the community of international election experts as to their suitability. Indeed, these terms may present the same problems as free and fair unless concrete definitions are universally accepted.

In his Guidelines for International Election Observing, Larry Garber acknowledges that:

...there is no prescribed procedure for ensuring a fair election. This reflects the cultural and historical diversity that makes the development of one ideal electoral system a practical impossibility. Observers must rely on their own judgment in evaluating whether a particular procedure in the context of an election in a particular country is unfair, and, to the extent that the procedure is unfair, its impact on the overall process...(Garber 1984:52).

Marilyn Zak (1987:175) concurs, explaining that because each country's election represents a unique process, "success in one country does not necessarily ensure a universal formula."

For the purposes of this study, we looked instead at whether a given election was successful or unsuccessful, using the following criteria as guidelines. Successful elections were those where: (1) two or more political parties were allowed to compete for power with reasonable media access and unimpeded movement throughout the country; and (2) international observers determined that the final election results reflected the will of the people. This definition is confined to the actual electoral event and does not take into consideration longer-term implications of the election. Elections in Angola and Haiti, for example, would be defined as successful despite the ultimate outcomes in those countries.

The case study analysis found that just over half of the elections -- Bulgaria, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Haiti, Guyana, Zambia, Senegal, and Angola -- can be defined as successful events using the above criteria. The remaining seven cases were unsuccessful, either because political parties were not allowed to compete freely, lacked adequate access to the media, were unable to campaign freely throughout the country, or elections were not perceived to have reflected the will of the people.

Strengthening Democratic Development and Good Governance

A second dimension to elections support is the possible extent to which the election strengthens democratic development and governance. Elections that serve to strengthen democracy and good governance are considered to be meaningful elections in the case study analysis. For analytical purposes, meaningful elections are distinguished from successful elections -- simply free and fair events that do not necessarily lead to strengthened democracy. Experience reveals that the linkage between successful elections and democratic development may be tenuous. In fact, successful elections may be necessary for democracy in the long run; however, this review of 15 case studies has found that they are not sufficient for improvements in the short to medium term.

Review of past experience reveals that free and fair elections have not always led to improvements in democracy, and in some cases have served to impede democratization (Karl 1986:9; Ottaway 1993). Of the 15 cases examined, election results in Haiti and Angola were not respected by local power contenders, and present prospects for democracy seem poor. During the 1980s and before, critics of U.S. support to elections in Latin America cautioned against the faith of policymakers in electoralism -- "that merely holding elections will channel political action into peaceful contests among elites and accord public legitimacy to the winners" (Karl 1986:34; Herman and Broadhead 1984). Political theorists have noted that democracy requires that politically active members of society share an underlying consensus on the rules to govern socioeconomic and political compromise (Dahl 1956; Karl 1986; Rustow 1970). In the absence of consensus on these rules, evidence suggests that support for elections alone is unlikely to achieve lasting impact in the democracy and governance area.

Similarly, past experience shows that unsuccessful elections can be a turning point, ultimately leading to improvements in democracy and governance. In the Philippines and Panama, evidence gathered while monitoring fraudulent elections was used to protest misrepresentative results. In spite of unfair elections, the democratization process has been supported through alternative means, including: (1) diplomatic protest, as in the Philippines; (2) non-recognition of newly installed governments; and (3) threat and use of military force, as in Panama.

Finally, evidence suggests that real advances in democracy and governance require nurturing the democratic process and building institutions that will survive, rather than limiting our support to the individual election event. USAID has democracy and governance programs in 12 of the 15 countries considered in this analysis. In countries where USAID is not involved in democracy and governance -- Pakistan, Angola, and Kenya -- assistance for elections had little impact on improvements in democracy. The ability of USAID to plan and implement a broader democracy and governance program appears to be associated positively with successful elections support. Conversely, evidence suggests that if USAID is unable or hesitant to carry out democratic development activities in a particular country, expectations of elections assistance should be minimal.

In a 1987 article on USAID's experience assisting elections, Marilyn Zak concluded that the real impact of elections support has

been modest. Zak observed that U.S. assistance had been helpful, generally seen as impartial, and specific elections benefitted from USAID support. However, when looking at the long-term impact of election support in Latin America, Zak found that

Overall, there has been no institutionalization of representative government nor any lasting assurance of genuine and periodic elections in targeted countries in the Western Hemisphere as a result of U.S. involvement in and assistance to elections (Zak 1987:177).

Assessing the true impact of U.S. support would require a rigorous evaluation rather than a brief review of case studies. Nonetheless, the evidence examined from 1986 to the present offers a slightly more optimistic conclusion. USAID elections support has benefitted individual elections, and a sound understanding now exists about how to use assistance effectively to support democratic elections. However, successful elections do not guarantee improvements in democracy and governance, and the long-term impact of elections assistance is not yet well understood. In the absence of improvements in democracy and governance, alternative democratic-development strategies that address the numerous constraints to democracy and governance merit consideration.

Supporting Sustainable Development

Theoretically, it is possible to argue that elections support -- intended to strengthen democratic development and good governance -- is also important because it may advance sustainable development. Literature abounds on the nature of the relationship between democracy and long-term socio-economic development, and the debate regarding this linkage is far from resolved.

However, none of the planning documents examined for the 15 case study elections explicitly linked USAID support to socio-economic development goals. Moreover, none of the academic analyses reviewed addressed the question of whether elections were associated with socio-economic development. Therefore, to date there is a lack of empirical analysis proving a direct relationship between USAID support for elections and sustainable development.

II. WHAT CONDITIONS AND FACTORS HAVE HAD A SIGNIFICANT IMPACT ON DONOR SUPPORT FOR ELECTIONS?

The decision to support a particular election typically is made by the U.S. Embassy's country team and involves parties concerned with both short- and long-term foreign policy objectives. Often, in the rush to be responsive to the host country's request for elections support, assistance is extended in the absence of an overall strategy for USAID support in the democracy and governance area. Given recent experience in Angola, Ethiopia, and Kenya, questions have been asked regarding the decision to provide assistance to elections (Ottaway 1993). In the future, decision makers would be advised to evaluate the role of U.S. assistance, and identify certain conditions that may signal the need for greater caution and more time for preparation.

A systematic method is needed for examining the individual country situation, and assessing whether assistance is appropriate. This is not to be confused with a pre-election assessment. The groups that provide elections support stress the importance of a pre-election assessment to survey the political terrain, identify technical problems, and propose a plan for support. However, pre-election assessments focus on answering how to support the elections process, not if it should be done at all. Therefore, decision makers must rely on alternative ways to study the host country situation prior to conducting a pre-election assessment, which often raises expectations for continued involvement.

A review of the literature revealed that a large number of factors outside of the control of donors have been considered important by analysts in determining the success or failure of individual elections. However, this list of variables -- encompassing all major aspects of political, military, and economic conditions -- is of little use to decision makers because no relative importance across case studies was assigned to the conditions. Therefore, in the following sections, the relative significance of many variables is examined. The conclusions draw attention to conditions that influence the outcome of elections across case studies.

Key Factors Influencing Success or Failure in Individual Cases

Based on a literature review of case study experiences, a number of factors were observed by analysts to be significant in influencing the outcome of individual elections. Typically, their analysis has focused on whether elections were meaningful (whether they led to improvements in democratic development) rather than whether elections were successful events. Before assessing the significance of these variables across case studies, first it is necessary to present those conditions observed as important in individual elections, and as a result considered in this analysis. The factors that emerged in the literature are ordered below according to the frequency with which they have been seen to influence elections in the case studies reviewed:

- o Party-State Linkage -- in 11 cases, the lack of a separation between government functions and the incumbent political party structure was considered by analysts of individual cases to be a problem.
- o Commitment of Political Parties -- in 10 cases, analysts noted that the willingness (six cases) or unwillingness (four cases) of political parties to participate in and abide by elections influenced the election outcome.
- o History of Democracy -- in 10 cases, analysts noted that election outcome was affected positively by a tradition of elections and democratic practices (five cases), or negatively affected by their absence (five cases).
- o Electoral System -- in 10 cases, analysts noted the importance of the electoral system. In six cases the electoral system was considered adequate, and in four cases inadequate to allow expression of popular will.

- o Access to Media and Campaign Resources -- in nine cases, analysts noted the importance of access to media and campaign resources. In four cases, it was seen as a problem, and in five cases, access was assessed positively.
- o Civil Rights -- in nine cases, respect for (one case), or violation of (eight cases), civil rights was observed by analysts to be influential.
- o Civil Society -- in five cases, the presence of non-governmental associations and interest groups such as the church or labor was observed by analysts to affect elections positively, and in two cases, the absence of civil society was seen to have a negative impact.
- o Ethnic Divisions -- in six cases, ethnic tensions were observed by analysts to be a problem.
- o Armed Civil Conflict -- in five cases, analysts noted that a situation of armed civil conflict hindered a successful election process.
- o Economic Situation -- in two cases, the desire of the electorate to improve a deteriorating economic situation was seen to have affected democratization positively.

Significance of Factors in Determining Outcome

Although it is interesting to note the frequency certain factors are mentioned by analysts, it is far more important to assess the significance of these factors across case studies in determining election outcome and progress toward democracy.

Analysis showed a clear and consistent relationship between five conditions and strengthened democracy and governance: (1) the commitment of political parties to democratic processes; (2) the history of democracy within the country; (3) the strength or weakness of civil society; (4) the linkage between the state and a particular political party; and (5) the electoral system. These five factors appear to be most important to consider when deciding whether elections support is likely to lead to improvements in democracy and good governance.

Gauging the Commitment of Political Parties. The commitment of political parties to the democratic process is clearly important. In Haiti, Guyana, Nicaragua, Zambia, Senegal, and Bangladesh, the decision of political actors to engage in elections and abide by results was observed by analysts to be a significant step toward democracy. Conversely, in Angola, Ethiopia, and Kenya, insufficient commitment by one or more political parties was seen to be an important obstacle to meaningful elections.

If political parties or other political actors (military, economic elites) fail to abide by election results, then elections cannot lead to democracy. A cross-country analysis by Michael Bratton found that in all African elections that he studied, when the incumbent won re-election, the opposition alleged fraud. Although this is not the case for other geographic regions, it does

highlight the importance of political commitment. When donors provide elections support, they must test the assumption that the results of elections will be respected by the losers.

Assessing the Extent of Democratic Histories and Traditions. A tradition of voting, a history of democratic customs, or a widespread belief in democracy within countries has been seen to improve the chance that elections will lead to democratization, as in Chile and Bangladesh. The lack of these traditions and customs in countries like Haiti, Angola, Ethiopia, and Romania were observed as significant obstacles to democratic progress through elections.

Surveying the Extent of Civil Society. Associational networks, non-governmental organizations, and interest groups, such as the church and labor, are critical for the long-term maintenance of democracy. During elections, these groups can monitor elections, conduct parallel vote counts, engage in formal and non-formal civic education, and in cases of fraud, protest the election results. A strong civil society was seen to play a positive role in elections in Chile, Zambia and Senegal. Moreover, the role of civil society was seen to be positive in strengthening democratic development in the Philippines in 1986 and Kenya in 1992, despite unsuccessful elections. Conversely, a weak civil society undermined meaningful elections, ones leading to improvements in democracy and governance, in Angola and Romania.

Negotiating With Host Country Governments to Level the Playing Field -- Election System Reform and De-linkage. The two other apparent determinants of unsuccessful elections -- state/party linkage and a flawed electoral system -- on occasion have been improved through donor negotiations. In Guyana, USAID's initial refusal to provide economic assistance in the absence of free and fair elections resulted in concessions of electoral reforms by the Government of Guyana, and a far more fair election event. In a similar situation in Nicaragua, negotiations between pre-election delegates and the Sandinista government elicited a greater separation of the state and the party -- known as de-linkage -- making the electoral process more competitive. Therefore, when confronted with a situation where de-linkage is required, or reforms in the electoral system are necessary, decision makers should assess the likelihood that the government will make concessions.

At the same time, it is important to keep in mind that no system yet devised eliminates the advantage of the incumbent in re-election. Donors can level the playing field through negotiation; however, the incumbent will always retain the advantage. Although a worthwhile goal, it is unrealistic to expect a completely equitable competition. Again, the key is to gauge the commitment of the incumbent to conduct a meaningful election, and abide by its results (Zak 1987).

It is also interesting to note the factors that did not consistently determine whether or not elections were meaningful across case studies based on the observations of analysts. These include respect for, or violations of, civil rights, access to the media and other campaign resources, the economic situation, and ethnic divisions. Certainly, these variables can influence individual elections; however, across case studies they do not invariably determine outcome. The variation across case studies

for two factors -- civil rights and access to the media -- are described briefly below.

Civil Rights. Persistent violations of civil rights were seen by analysts to be detrimental in over half the cases; nonetheless, successful elections (relatively free and fair) took place under these circumstances in Angola, Haiti, Zambia, and Bulgaria. In the cases where civil rights abuses led to unsuccessful elections -- Panama, Romania, and the Philippines -- the violations were largely attributed to the political party in control of government. Hence, if violations originate from the state, evidence suggests that it is less likely that elections will either be free and fair or meaningful. Violations in civil rights can inhibit democracy from taking root and merit long-term attention as part of a democracy and governance strategy. However, in the short term, violations throughout society in general need not prevent a successful election event.

Access to the Media and Other Campaign Resources. Serious problems with access to the media and campaign resources were common throughout the case studies. Because the state controls broadcast media in most developing countries, the incumbent typically enjoys greater access to mass communications than opposition parties. Particularly when there is little separation between the incumbent's political party apparatus and government resources (as in 10 of 15 cases), access to the media and other campaign resources is inequitable. Despite its frequency as a problem, access to the media and other campaign resources did not appear invariably to determine election outcome across case studies. For example, in Nicaragua, despite constant closing of La Prensa, the opposition newspaper, and other inequities in access to the media, the Nicaraguan people were persuaded through a number of other channels to vote for the united opposition. In Kenya, where elections were subject to considerable criticism for being just barely free and fair enough to have reflected the will of Kenyans, the alternative press filled voids in information. The Nicaraguan case suggests that if the issues and messages in campaign are not too complex (e.g., the opposition is united and their platform widely understood), unfair access to broadcast media will not necessarily impede the ability of the opposition to wage a successful campaign.

Further Considerations and Cross-cutting Lessons Learned

Several cross-cutting lessons emerged in the literature review and are relevant when considering whether to provide elections support:

The type of election being held is more important than the geographic region itself. We reviewed the type of election being held to see if there were any commonalities across case studies. Three categories of elections were represented in the examples: consolidation elections, conflict-resolution elections, and transition elections.

- o One example was considered to be a consolidation election -- Senegal -- where U.S. support was intended to assist a democratically elected government in carrying out improved elections. Donor support in this case was clearly successful.

- o Two other examples were considered to be conflict-resolution elections, Nicaragua and Angola. Both elections were held as the means to resolve civil war, and illustrated completely different outcomes. The Angolan and Nicaraguan experiences suggest that for support to be successful in conflict-resolution situations, attention must be devoted prior to elections to demobilizing troops, brokering an effective peace plan, and securing the commitment of warring parties to abide by the results of the election.
- o Twelve of the 15 case studies involved transition elections where an impartial, transitional government held the election, or where a non-elected leader held elections to legitimize the government. Across these elections, there was great diversity in outcome. In five cases, the elections were generally successful events in themselves. For the remaining seven transitional cases, election results were questioned. Therefore, given the large number of transition elections considered -- 12 of 15 total cases -- the conclusions for the review as a whole apply. No trends unique to these elections emerged.

Even if the election process is anticipated to be flawed, there may be a positive role for donors to play in supporting the election. However, it is extremely important that before committing assistance, decision makers think through their objectives, assumptions, and degrees of commitment to ensuring respect for the expression of popular will. For example, in Panama, elections were expected to be fraudulent; however, Panamanians saw that the elections provided an opportunity to register discontent with the Noriega regime. International donors responded to Panamanian requests for observers so that the expected fraud could be reported to the international community. At present, obvious fraud seems less common than in the days of Noriega and Marcos; the D+ elections of a leader like Kenya's Moi seem a more serious concern. The key is for donors to expect this type of election, and plan their objectives in advance of providing assistance.

If international intervention is required to guarantee security during elections, the prospects for maintaining post-election security are grim. Both Haiti and Angola illustrate this point. Elected governments were unable to secure respect for the popular will expressed in the polls. Although it is difficult to deny a country like Haiti assistance in conducting elections, expectations for similar elections in the future should be modest. In the short term, elections that require international security assistance are unlikely to result in improvements in democracy and governance, yet in the longer term, the experience of voting in a free and fair election may have a lasting and positive impact on the host country population.

III. HOW CAN USAID BEST SUPPORT THE ELECTORAL PROCESS?

Once USAID determines that electoral assistance is an appropriate response to a given country's needs, it must then decide what type of intervention will best achieve USAID's goals in

that country. As in the preceding discussion, the following sections first review the key interventions and the frequency of their use in individual case studies. Then, based on a review of analysts' observations, the particular types of interventions associated with successful election outcomes are identified.

Key Interventions and the Frequency of Their Use in Individual Cases

Eight interventions, or modes of assistance, were considered for their potential positive or negative impact on election outcomes in the 15 cases examined. Certain electoral assistance interventions generally stood out as having been positively or negatively significant. The rankings below reflect a combination of past level of use and perceived effectiveness of each intervention type. It is important to note that an intervention is only one factor in a complex electoral process. Thus an election may be "unsuccessful" despite the positive significance of a specific intervention, or vice versa.

The interventions are divided into two categories: (1) the overarching "tactics" used in providing electoral assistance; and (2) the specific "tools" employed. Again, effectiveness is measured in the context of the electoral event itself, rather than the long-term outcome of that event.

Tactics:

- o Timing -- in 11 cases, the timing of U.S. Government or implementing group involvement in a country was seen as affecting the outcome of the electoral process either positively or negatively. Though involvement at least three months prior to elections generally was seen as having strengthened the electoral process, involvement at least six months in advance is recommended. Conversely, involvement less than three months prior to elections rarely was seen to be sufficient, given the highly logistical nature of electoral support.
- o Multilateral Cooperation -- in nine cases, a strong, multilateral effort was a significant and positive factor in the election process.
- o Diplomatic Involvement -- in seven cases, the existence or absence of U.S. Government diplomatic involvement was linked to electoral success or failure.

Tools:

- o International Observer Efforts -- in 12 cases, international observer missions generally were considered to have enhanced the electoral process.
- o Pre-Electoral Missions -- in 10 cases, pre-electoral efforts reinforced the electoral process; in one case, the absence of pre-electoral involvement was seen as contributing to electoral failure.
- o Parallel Vote Tabulations (PVT) or "Quick Counts" -- in seven

cases, either parallel vote tabulations or "quick counts" were seen as successful in providing early election results and, in some cases, forestalling violence. In two cases, their absence was seen as negatively influencing the electoral process.

- o Domestic Monitors -- in five cases, domestic monitors were valuable to the electoral process; in three cases, the absence of nonpartisan domestic monitors was seen as detrimental to the electoral process.
- o Post-Electoral Interest -- although democratic consolidation efforts were implemented following elections in some cases (Zambia and Panama, for example), it is still too early to gauge their impact on subsequent elections.

Although interesting to note the types of interventions most often used, the frequency of application should not be equated with their overall effectiveness. Because each case study represents a unique combination of electoral assistance interventions, some tools and tactics have been used more than others. For example, using international observer teams was common to 13 of our 15 cases, whereas funding nonpartisan domestic monitors was common only to five cases. Unfortunately, without the luxury of comparing the results of each intervention type across the board, a complete comparative analysis of the effectiveness of the various electoral assistance tools and tactics is not feasible.

Significance of Interventions in Determining Outcome

The intervention types perceived as having been significant in affecting election outcomes across case studies are detailed below, along with a discussion of related issues and caveats. Beyond assisting with the administration of a successful election, many of the approaches outlined below have the added benefit of laying the groundwork for strengthened indigenous institutions and encouraging the democratization process.

Tactics:

Getting in as early as possible. Based on case study review, an early and continuous involvement in a country was nearly always seen to improve the election process. Election projects are by nature highly logistical endeavors. Given the inherent difficulties in carrying out an election project in this context, it is advisable to set overly generous timetables for each component of the process, where possible. In Bangladesh, for example, the National Democratic Institute's (NDI) initial survey mission occurred in 1987, four years prior to the elections. Additionally, NDI visited Bangladesh six times during the 15-month period leading up to the elections. In Senegal, an international delegation of election experts conducted an electoral assessment in 1990, three years before the 1993 elections, allowing for plenty of time to work with the government on reforms of the electoral system, particularly the electoral code. It is important to note that the U.S. Government and implementing groups do not always have the luxury of long-term involvement prior to elections. In Romania, Kenya, and Ethiopia, for example, rapid transitions

necessitated prompt responses, allowing for very little lead time to carry out pre-election activities.

A separate but related question is to what extent the U.S. Government and/or implementing organizations should pressure host governments and transitional governments to stick to election timetables. For example, some argue that in Ethiopia, Western donors pressured the transitional government to hold elections earlier than was logistically feasible. Also, in Angola, the U.S. Government pushed for an election before the terms of the cease-fire -- encampment, disarmament, and formation of a national army -- were fully respected (Cohen 1993:5). Ottaway (1993:5) claims that "[if] elections are held prematurely and fail, the effect is to slow down democratization rather than to accelerate it." The U.S. Government and implementing organizations need to be realistic about their expectations of host governments, particularly in countries with high levels of civil strife and/or no tradition of democratic, multiparty elections. In these cases, postponing elections to allow host governments to adequately prepare may be more beneficial in the long run.

Participating in multilateral efforts. Strong multilateral electoral assistance efforts were significant in nine out of 15 case studies. Where donors have undertaken a broad-based, coordinated electoral assistance effort, all parties generally have benefitted. Host governments have received a greater range of complementary assistance when donors avoid duplication of efforts. Additionally, the U.S. Government has benefitted through sharing information, consultants, and other resources, with other donors working toward a common goal. Despite the overall failure of the Kenyan election, donors established a donor democracy and governance group (DDGG) as a clearinghouse for information nine months prior to the election that proved quite valuable. In Zambia, the Z-Vote project was a broad-based, coordinated effort funded by the U.S. Government, Denmark, Finland, Germany, the Netherlands, Norway, and Sweden. Additionally, Canada and the United Kingdom directly supported two monitoring groups. Finally, U.S. participation in larger, multilateral efforts has minimized the politicization of election assistance that is sometimes identified with one donor. Strong coordination among co-equal donors tends to lessen suspicions of host governments about the electoral assistance and observation processes.

Tools:

Supporting international observer efforts. In 12 of the case studies examined, international observer efforts were seen to have contributed significantly to the electoral process, whether or not the outcome of the elections ultimately reflected the will of the citizenry. Most electoral practitioners seem to agree that international observer teams are necessary to reassure voters, deter fraud on election day, and report on the overall fairness of the process, regardless of the outcome. McCoy, Pastor, and Garber suggest that international observer delegations ensure that the election will either be conducted fairly or denounced as fraudulent (McCoy et al 1991: 104). This raises an important question: If an observer delegation's negative report is not backed up by a coordinated U.S. Government policy, is the observation effort valuable in its own right? Marina Ottaway argues that the mere presence of a delegation may give undeserved credibility to a

flawed electoral process, even if the delegation's final report reflects the election's failure. In Ethiopia, for example, Ottaway suggests that the United Nations-sponsored Joint International Observer Group had the effect of "sprinkl[ing] holy water on a rigged process," witnessing countless violations with no meaningful repercussions despite the group's critical report (Ottaway 1993: 4). Overall, however, most electoral experts contend that observer teams serve an important purpose, as long as they are free to report fully and promptly to the international community on all aspects of the electoral process. Finally, in those cases where the U.S. Government has been poised to follow up on reports issued by delegations with diplomatic action, final outcomes generally have been seen as more successful (e.g., Panama, Philippines). Conversely, observer efforts may also be useful in reinforcing "free and fair" elections. By proclaiming the results of such elections valid, observers can discourage losing parties from claiming fraud.

Funding pre-electoral involvement to improve electoral systems and laws. Although it is difficult to alter substantially a country's electoral system through USAID-funded electoral assistance, some pre-electoral missions have been successful in this area. In 10 out of 15 of the case studies reviewed, pre-electoral assistance was seen as generally having improved the electoral environment by defusing potential conflicts and lending confidence to the electoral process. Furthermore, the inclusion of prominent and respected individuals on pre-electoral missions (e.g., members of the Council of Freely Elected Heads of Government) has tended to increase a delegation's leverage in encouraging concrete reforms. In Zambia, for example, President Jimmy Carter and Ambassador Lisbet Palme of Sweden laid out several areas of concern and pressed successfully for specific changes in the electoral procedures during pre-electoral visits coordinated through the USAID-funded Zambia Voting Observation Project (Z-Vote) co-sponsored by NDI and the Carter Center (National Democratic Institute 1992). Though generally more influential, pre-electoral delegations of heads of state are not always necessary. Early NDI involvement in Senegal, for example, led to the adoption of specific electoral code reforms, despite the absence of a high-level mission.

Encouraging Parallel Vote Tabulations/"Quick Counts". Parallel vote tabulations (PVTs) and "quick counts" were seen to be significant in each case where they were undertaken (seven out of 15), whether by indigenous non-governmental organizations (NGOs), private international observer groups, or international bodies such as the United Nations or the Organization of American States. PVTs and "quick counts" succeeded in boosting the electorate's confidence, providing independent verification of the election's results, and -- in a few cases -- forestalling violent situations where the official results were slow to be announced. In Haiti and Nicaragua, particularly, PVTs allowed for an early announcement of election results and defused potentially violent situations. In Panama, a "quick count" conducted by NDI-funded indigenous NGOs played a critical role in providing credible and timely information on the results of the presidential election, thus supporting the final determination that Noriega had been defeated. The absence of a PVT can place the U.S. Government and international observer groups in a difficult position if the election results are disputed (e.g., Angola). Where a PVT or "quick count" is not possible, other forms of analysis may prove useful. In Pakistan, for

example, NDI used statistical analysis to counter Bhutto's claim that she was unfairly denied an absolute majority.

Financing Domestic Observer Efforts. Although international observer groups can serve an important purpose, providing assistance to domestic, non-partisan monitoring groups has proved to be an effective, long-term investment in a country's democratization process. In Zambia, for example, the USAID-funded Z-Vote team trained and deployed between 3,000 and 4,000 domestic monitors through two separate domestic observer groups (ZIMT and ZEMCC) in one of the first examples of a large-scale domestic vote monitoring project. This endeavor proved highly successful in establishing the foundation for a sustained and active presence of domestic monitoring groups in Zambia. In the Philippines, NAMFREL proved to be a model for domestic monitoring organizations, deploying 500,000 volunteer pollwatchers to 80 percent of the country's polling stations (Zak 1987: 186). NAMFREL's "quick count" supported Aquino's victory, thus providing a strong basis for her legitimacy in the face of Marcos' manipulation of the official results. In Bulgaria, over 10,000 BAFE volunteers performed pollwatching tasks and diligently reported on election irregularities.

In certain circumstances, however, international observer teams may be preferable to domestic monitoring teams. For example, in countries where ethnic divisiveness or other factors generate a charged atmosphere of distrust, suspicion, or violence, forming domestic monitoring teams that are perceived as being nonpartisan may prove difficult. Domestic observers in countries such as Haiti, Ethiopia, and Angola may have enjoyed little credibility.

Additionally, the nature of assistance to domestic observers has produced varying results. In some cases, too much financial assistance has been seen to smother small monitoring groups and encourage financial mismanagement. Financing several small groups (Zambia) rather than one large group (Kenya) has been successful in the past and may even encourage a healthy competition among those monitoring groups.

Finally, the successful support of a domestic monitoring effort may have benefits far beyond the election at hand. For example, NDI has effectively deployed experienced monitors from countries such as Kenya, Romania, Bulgaria, and the Philippines to conduct pre-election training sessions for domestic monitoring groups in Nepal and Yemen.

Further Considerations and Cross-cutting Lessons Learned

In addition to the types of tactics and tools that appeared to be most significant in promoting successful elections across case studies, the following cross-cutting themes emerged as important to consider when designing an electoral assistance program:

Supporting Regional Efforts. USAID support to bolster the efforts of regional institutions has been perceived to be effective in fostering long-term democratization. For example, USAID has seen positive results through its support of the Center for Electoral Promotion and Assistance (CAPEL), which provides technical advice and promotes elections throughout Latin America

(Zak 1987: 182). To date, however, regional electoral assistance efforts outside of Latin America are embryonic if existent. The Study and Research Group on Democracy and Economic and Social Development (GERDDES), a relatively new West African regional organization, is just beginning to get involved in providing the expertise of its membership in support of African elections. Support for these regional and continental efforts can have wide-reaching benefits, as countries within the same region share information and electoral experiences. Strong regional efforts may also raise pressure on incumbent governments to promote free and fair elections.

Allowing Distance Between the U.S. Government and Implementing Organizations/Observer Delegations During the Election Observation Period. The case study review shows that it has proved beneficial for the U.S. Government to distance itself from certain electoral assistance endeavors, particularly international observation efforts, during the actual elections. In addition to guarding the independence of a given observer mission, a hands-off approach by the U.S. Government during the observation period may allow it to retain more negotiating power for the post-election period, if necessary. For example, the U.S. Government was seen as keeping a relatively hands-off stance during less controversial elections in Bangladesh, Bulgaria, and Zambia. In contrast, the U.S. Government was perceived as being directly involved in the international observation efforts in Panama and Ethiopia, which may have jeopardized the neutrality of the effort and reinforced the notion that elections were held primarily to placate Western donor nations. In Kenya, it has been argued that the U.S. Government's close ties to the opposition may have jeopardized ongoing relations with the incumbent government.

Restricting U.S. Government Involvement to the Application of Diplomatic Pressure. Though perceived U.S. involvement in international observer efforts may be detrimental, U.S. diplomatic pressure has been used successfully following elections to fortify observer efforts, particularly in cases where incumbent governments were not genuinely committed to free and fair elections. For example, in the Philippines the U.S. Government was prepared to stand by the findings of international observer teams and ensure that the popular will of the citizenry was not thwarted by the incumbent government. In contrast, the Angolan situation is arguably a case where the U.S. Government failed to reinforce the findings of international observers. In this case, it is questionable whether electoral assistance, including the observer mission, without diplomatic reinforcement was effective, either in the short or long run.

CONCLUSION

Analysis shows that although USAID has a good understanding of how to use assistance effectively to support democratic elections, there is still uncertainty about the long-term impact of assistance on democracy and sustainable development. Beyond deciding if and how to support elections, it is important to look back after the event to determine if the support helped to achieve the political and economic goals of the host country. Since donors have not yet undertaken this task in any systematic way, some thoughts based on this case study review merit mention.

A sustainable and meaningful elections process requires several inputs: institutions ready to hold the competition at regular intervals, parties willing to participate, and people ready to form opinions and cast votes. Based on the case study review, certain indicators will measure more meaningful and lasting progress than others when evaluating elections support.

To assess the institutions, evaluators cannot be fooled by a veneer of regular elections. Instead, they must ask if the rules of the game established by institutions are providing the vehicle for resolving contentious socio-economic and political issues. Building consensus on the rules of the game is essential. To assess the infrastructure for elections, evaluators need to find out if those who worked with donors in the past are planning their involvement in future elections. If so, then chances for a sustainable elections process are increased. Finally, to understand the electorate, it is necessary to identify if there is a commonly held sense of democratic history and traditions needed to sustain the democratic process. It is most important that people see themselves as politically empowered, either as a result of a democratic past, or through a future vision of their society. Once applied, this type of analysis will yield the evidence needed to better understand how donors can support meaningful elections that will lead to sustainable democratic development.

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